

Executive Summary

The modern movement to preserve and enhance the visual character of this country was set in motion in 1965 by President and Lady Bird Johnson, Laurance S. Rockefeller and other visionaries who saw and sought to remedy a number of serious and mounting threats to America the Beautiful. That year's White House Conference on Natural Beauty and signing of the Highway Beautification Act should have marked the beginning of a new era in scenic conservation.

But fifty years later the threats to America's visual environment have never been greater, and we as citizens stand at a critical juncture in determining how our country looks. Do we want America, fifty years from now, to be full of homogenized landscapes, tarnished roadsides and unattractive communities? Or do we want to live in a country that values and honors its natural and built environments?

Scenic America believes that all Americans deserve to live, travel through, and visit places that are beautiful and unique. To that end we have assembled this document as a guide to realizing the goals of our visionary predecessors like the Johnsons and Rockefellers. The paper is divided into five topics with overarching challenges to scenic beauty in America, accompanied by bold but achievable solutions to those problems.

Placemaking: Preserving and Enhancing Community Character

The distinctive character and individual sense of place of many American communities is threatened by a variety of pressures, including poorly planned urban and suburban growth, misguided community leadership and powerful business forces, and the proliferation of massive chain businesses and their concomitant corporate franchise design.

Our proposed solutions include:

- Enacting legislation to expand the creation of local historic districts, local design review boards, scenic byway programs, and the acquisition of open space;
- Creating a Gateway Enhancement block grant program to encourage enhancement of the roadways that lead into our communities;
- Expanding the scope of historic districts to include viewshed lands and bordering areas.



Prospect Terrace Park overlooking
Providence, Rhode Island

Honoring Parks and Open Spaces

An increasing amount of evidence suggests that our country's parks, open spaces, forests, wilderness areas and greenways contribute greatly to the health and prosperity of the American public. But a lack of adequate and sustained public funding, disparate advocacy groups and increasing development pressures threaten existing parks and open spaces and imperil future additions to current assets.

Our proposed solutions include:

- Increasing funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the creation of parks and the acquisition of open space;
- Establishing a national inventory of parks and open spaces to determine funding priorities for acquisitions and investment;
- Requiring that context-sensitive design be used for publicly funded projects in parks and open spaces.



[Scenic Byway 12 leading to Bryce Canyon National Park](#)

Celebrating Byways and Gateways

The “open road” is synonymous with modern America, and the most treasured of these roads have received state or federal recognition as Scenic Byways for their scenic, cultural, historic, recreational or archaeological value. Studies have proved that Scenic Byways are sources of pride and economic engines for the communities they traverse, yet funding for the federal program has been eliminated and the doorway for any new byway designations has been slammed

shut. Similarly, gateway roads leading to many of America’s iconic parks, monuments and communities are under increasing threat from visual blight which diminishes the overall traveler experience.

Our proposed solutions include:

- Reopening the doorway for new National Scenic Byway designations;
- Encouraging the formation of a national association of gateway communities to work collectively towards solutions to common gateway problems and issues;
- Creating “Gateway Impact Zones” in visually cluttered gateways approaching and adjacent to National Parks that would be eligible for grants to improve their scenic character.

Mitigating Visual Impacts of Overhead Wires

Overhead utility wires have a tremendous impact on the visual quality of our built environments due to their proximity to the streetscape and their sheer ubiquity. However, overhead wires, unlike billboards, provide the public with tangible benefits: we cannot do without the electricity and other vital services that these wires transmit. So the challenge is how to best limit the impacts of these necessary wires on our visual environments.

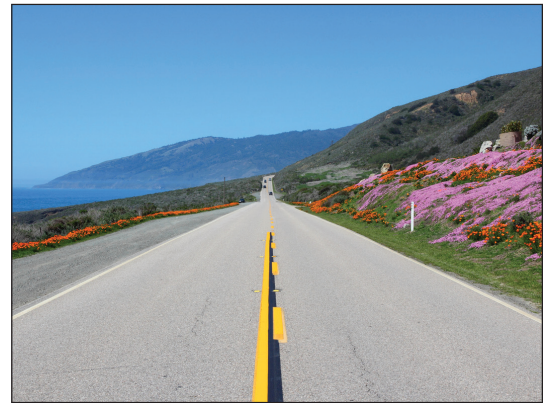
Our proposed solutions include:

- Making decisions about mitigating visual impacts of overhead wires on a case-by-case basis. In areas where undergrounding is not feasible efforts should be made to camouflage or otherwise minimize visual impacts of overhead wires;
 - Requiring the undergrounding of utility wires in new development or when replacing aging roads, sidewalks and infrastructure;
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- Identify opportunities for co-locating existing overhead wires with other utility improvements in existing rights-of-way.

Promoting Beautiful Highways

A substantial portion of the White House Conference on Natural Beauty was dedicated to determining how to protect the visual character of the roadsides of America's burgeoning highway system. It produced an early draft of the Highway Beautification Act with a stated purpose to protect the public investment in highways and to preserve the natural beauty of the landscapes they traverse. However commercial and private interests, particularly those of the outdoor advertising industry, continue to threaten our roadsides and undermine the goals of "Lady Bird's Law."



California's Pacific Coast Highway,
one of the nation's longest scenic highways

Our proposed solutions include:

- Enacting federal and state legislation to prohibit the destruction of public trees to increase billboard visibility;
- Compelling the Federal Highway Administration to adhere to the Congressional mandate of "customary use" for lighting, size and spacing of billboards;
- Restoring amortization as a legal option available to local and state governments for the purchase of billboards erected along HBA-regulated highways.

Within each section we have highlighted the economic and public health benefits of promoting scenic beauty. Achieving a long lasting America the Beautiful will improve the well-being and prosperity of our citizens, and Scenic America believes that within this white paper we have created a roadmap for reaching that goal.